

John Abbot, the English Naturalist-Artist, in Virginia

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ABSTRACT

John Abbot (1751-ca. 1840), the English naturalist-artist, is best remembered for his paintings executed while he resided in Georgia. Little is known, however, about his activities when he lived briefly in Virginia from 1773 to 1775. In the book *The Natural History of the Rarer Lepidopterous Insects of Georgia*, authored by J. E. Smith and J. Abbot in 1797, are 42 illustrations of butterflies and moths with accompanying text indicating their occurrence in both Virginia and Georgia. Some related correspondence with Abbot's supporters confirms his natural history activities while in Virginia.

Key words: butterflies, drawings, Georgia, moths.

Most of the life and achievements of the English naturalist-artist John Abbot (1751-ca. 1840) have been well-studied and documented, especially his early years in London and later years in Georgia (Remington, 1948; Stresemann, 1953; Rogers-Price, 1983; Simpson, 1984; Wilkinson, 1984; Lagen & Rogers-Price, 1985; Gilbert, 1998; Calhoun, 2006a, b, 2007a, b, c). Less well-known are his experiences and accomplishments during his brief residency in Virginia. In this paper we document a few of the butterflies and moths that Abbot reported from Virginia between 1773 and 1775.

John Abbot was born in London in June 1751. His early life included experiences in natural history, such as illustrating and collecting insects. He was influenced and supported by the London naturalists Dru Drury (1725-1804) and George Edwards (1694-1773). He developed into a fine natural history illustrator as he drew larvae, pupae, and adult insects on their hostplants. His natural history interests were honed by reading John Lawson's *New Voyage to Carolina* (1709), Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina*,

Florida and the Bahama Islands (1731-1743), and George Edwards' *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds* (1743-1751). Abbot recalled that in 1772 he "began to entertain thoughts of going abroad to collect foreign insects myself," adding, "In the beginning of the year 1773, I was determined to come to America...I had met with a hist[ory] of Virginia [probably Beverley, 1705] painted in such glowing Colours, & the Voyage there being much shorter, I determined on Virginia" (autobiography, "Notes on My Life," MCZ, Harvard University; Remington, 1948).

Abbot's travel plans crystallized after he received a commission from the Royal Society, as well as from the London naturalists Dru Drury and Thomas Martyn (active 1760-1816), to collect American natural history specimens. Abbot left London in July 1773 aboard the *Royal Exchange*, arriving at the mouth of the James River in Virginia on 16 September 1773. On the ship he met Parke and Mary Goodall, who were returning with provisions for their store in Hanover County. The Goodalls invited Abbot to board at their home, where he would live for the next two years. Abbot carried a letter of introduction from Drury to James Greenway (ca. 1703-1794), a physician and botanist in eastern Dinwiddie County, Virginia, who had previously sent

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natural history specimens to Drury. Drury also urged Abbot to contact Rev. Devereux Jarrett (1733-1801), another ardent botanist in Dinwiddie County who provided many insect specimens to Drury. Despite Drury's encouragement to learn from these seasoned naturalists, their remote locations precluded visits from Abbot. Abbot therefore undertook his New World studies on his own, improving his skills over time as an artist and collector. Like a protective father cautioning his son, Drury advised Abbot to "steer clear of party affairs...I am not ignorant of ye position of the Virginians & therefore would recommend it to you in a peculiar manner to avoid all disputes" (letter dated 10 April 1774, Drury correspondence, The Natural History Museum, London [BMNH]).

In April 1774, Drury acknowledged Abbot's success in procuring insects, noting that he had collected 570 species, but asked, "will you not search into other parts of Natural History? Particularly the Mineralia" (Drury correspondence, BMNH). Abbot sent three shipments of insects to his English sponsors, but only one reached Thomas Martyn in London, the others were forever lost at sea. From the surviving shipment Drury took 10 insects, selecting only those species represented by three specimens (letter from Drury to Abbot, 28 November 1774). Most of Abbot's 570 species were probably lost at sea because Drury anticipated a "grand collection" that never arrived.

Based on a set of drawings and accompanying notes by Abbot, the English physician and naturalist James E. Smith (1759-1858) published in 1797 *The Natural History of the Rarer Lepidopterous Insects of Georgia*. The published volume consisted of text in English and French with 104 hand-colored engravings that were reproduced from Abbot's drawings (Calhoun, 2006a), which included life-sized figures of the larva, pupa, and adult insect of each species, along with their hostplants (e.g., Fig. 1, front cover). Abbot's detailed original drawings are currently preserved in the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University, while his accompanying handwritten notes are deposited in the Linnean Society of London. Abbot entitled these drawings "A Natural History of North American Insects. Particularly those of the State of Georgia. Including the changes of the principal Insects of those parts, together with the plant or flower each species feeds on, in their Natural Colours. Drawn from Nature by John Abbot, many Years Resident in those parts. With Notes Scientific and Illustrative." Smith edited Abbot's notes for publication and occasionally altered their meaning. For example, Abbot remarked in his notes that the "Black & Yellow Swallow tailed Butterfly" (*Papilio polyxenes* F.) was "frequent in Virginia, but there is none in Georgia." Smith changed



Fig. 1. The Red-spotted Purple, *Limenitis arthemis astyanax* (F.), Plate 10 from *Insects of Georgia* by J. E. Smith & J. Abbot (1797).

this passage to read, "It is more frequent in Virginia than in Georgia." Because Smith called the book *Insects of Georgia*, he obviously wanted all of the species to occur there. As it turns out, Smith was correct about this butterfly; Abbot's notes for later illustrations of this species indicate that it was "not common" in Georgia (Calhoun, unpubl. data). Abbot had no hand in the production of the book and was probably unaware of its publication for some time. By 1813, however, he was referring to it in correspondence (Cahoun, 2007a).

Bassett (1938) erroneously reported that the book included 24 references to butterflies and moths of Virginia, but it actually contains 42 such references (Table 1). The illustrations in *Insects of Georgia* constitute the principal available evidence for John Abbot's natural history activities in Virginia. Abbot lived in Hanover County, thus his explorations were presumably limited to that area of eastern Virginia. Derived from Abbot's notes, Smith wrote in the Preface of the book, "Georgia affords almost every Virginian species, along with many others." Abbot remarked that he had failed to find in Virginia eleven of the species that he portrayed among this set of drawings. Most of these species are now known to occur in Virginia, including the large Cecropia Moth, *Hyalophora cecropia* (L.), which is a widespread resident. Fourteen species attributed to Virginia in the book were therein

TABLE 1. Lepidoptera species recorded from Virginia in the book, *Insects of Georgia*. Published names are as given in the book; current scientific names are primarily in accordance with Hodges (1983) and Pelham (2008); current common names are primarily in accordance with Covell (1984) and Cech & Tudor (2005). References to Virginia are from Abbot's original notes and as edited by J. E. Smith for *Insects of Georgia*. Abbot's grammar and spelling are preserved.

PLATE NO.	PUBLISHED NAMES	CURRENT NAMES	COMMENTS BY ABBOT (A) AND SMITH (S)
I	PAPILIO TROILUS Black and Yellow Swallow-tail Butterfly	<i>Papilio polyxenes</i> F. Black Swallowtail	A: "This Butterfly is frequent in Virginia, but there is none in Georgia." S: "It is more frequent in Virginia than it is in Georgia."
II	PAPILIO ILEONEUS Sassafras Black Swallow-tail Butterfly	<i>Papilio troilus</i> L. Spicebush Swallowtail	A: "One in Virginia changed [into a chrysalis] 13 th Oct. bred 5 th April." S: "One of them in Virginia changed October 13 th , and the fly did not come out till April 5 th ."
III	PAPILIO PHILENOR Snake-root Black Swallow-tail Butterfly	<i>Battus philenor</i> (L.) Pipevine Swallowtail	A: "...is likewise plenty in Virginia." S: "This is one of the most common butterflies... and is no less plentiful in Virginia."
IV	PAPILIO AJAX Black-barr'd Swallow-tail Butterfly	<i>Eurytides marcellus</i> (Cramer) Zebra Swallowtail	A: "Is not very Common but much more frequent than in Virginia." S: "This species is not very common in Georgia, though much more so than in Virginia."
V	PAPILIO EUBULE American Brimstone Butterfly	<i>Phoebis sennae</i> (L.) Cloudless Sulphur	A: "The caterpillar is not common. It is likewise in Virginia." S: "This is not a common caterpillar, though found likewise in Virginia."
X	PAPILIO URSULA Black and Blue Admirable Butterfly (Fig. 1, front cover)	<i>Limenitis arthemis astyanax</i> (F.) Red-spotted Purple	A: "It is also in Virginia, but neither the Butterfly or Catterpillar is very Common." S: "It is not very common either in the larva or perfect state, though found in Virginia as well as in Georgia."
XI	PAPILIO C. AUREUM American Comma Butterfly	<i>Polygonia interrogattonis</i> (F.) Question Mark	A: "...And is likewise in Virginia." S: "It occurs likewise in Virginia."
XV	PAPILIO ARGIOLLUS Little Blue Argus Butterfly	<i>Celastrina neglecta</i> (W.H. Edwards) Summer Azure	A: "The Butterfly is frequent in Georgia as well as Virginia." S: "... though the butterfly is often seen both in Georgia and Virginia."
XVI	PAPILIO OTHO Brown and Yellow Skipper Butterfly	<i>Wallengrenia otho</i> (J.E. Smith) Southern Broken-Dash	A: "It is also in Virginia." S: "It is also a native of Virginia."

Table 1 (continued).

PLATE NO.	PUBLISHED NAMES	CURRENT NAMES	COMMENTS BY ABBOT (A) AND SMITH (S)
XIX	PAPILIO TITYRUS Great Silver-spotted Skipper Butterfly	<i>Epargyveus clarus</i> (Cramer) Silver-spotted Skipper	A: "It is also in Virginia but is not very Common." S: "It is also a native of Virginia, but not very common."
XXI	PAPILIO JUVENALIS Dingy Skipper Butterfly	<i>Erynnis brizo</i> (Boisduval & Le Conte) / Sleepy Duskywing (male); <i>E. juvenalis</i> (F.) or <i>E. horatius</i> (Scudder & Burgess) / Juvenal's Duskywing or Horace's Duskywing (female)	A: "This is also in Virginia." S: "The same insect is a native of Virginia."
XXII	PAPILIO BATHYLLUS Brown Skipper Butterfly	<i>Thorybes bathyllus</i> (J.E. Smith) / Southern Cloudywing (male); <i>T. confusus</i> (Bell) / Confused Cloudywing (females)	A: "It is also in Virginia, and is one of the Commonest sorts of the Skippers." S: "It occurs also in Virginia, and is one of the most common if its tribe."
XXIII	PAPILIO ACCIUS Brown Corn Skipper Butterfly	<i>Lerema accius</i> (J.E. Smith) Clouded Skipper	A: "It is also in Virginia. But is not near so common as the last described." S: "It is also found in Virginia, but is not near so common as the last described."
XXIV	PAPILIO CATULLUS Black Skipper Butterfly	<i>Pholisora catullus</i> (F.) Common Sootywing	A: "... is also in Virginia." S: "... is also found in Virginia."
XXV	SPHINX EXCAECATA American Eyed Hawk-moth	<i>Paonia excaecata</i> (J.E. Smith) Blinded Sphinx	A: "It is likewise in Virginia, but is Rare to be met with." S: "Though found also in Virginia, it is a rare species."
XXXII	SPHINX CONVULSUS Potatoe Hawk-moth	<i>Agrius cingulata</i> (F.) Pink-spotted Hawk Moth	A: "[larva] Went into the ground 3d. Oct., Bred 30 th May in Virginia." S: "In Virginia one of these insects buried itself October 3d, and came forth in its perfect state the 30 th of May."
XXXIV	SPHINX CHIONATHI Fringe-tree Hawk-moth	<i>Manduca rustica</i> (F.) Rustic Sphinx	A: "I procured several [caterpillars] in Virginia upon the Lilac..." S: "I procured several in Virginia upon the last-mentioned shrub [lilac]..."
XXXIX	SPHINX LINEATA Purslane, or Pink-underwing Hawk-moth	<i>Hyles lineata</i> (F.) White-lined Sphinx	A: "... Several was taken in a Garden in Virginia sucking the Lilac blossoms on the 17 th April." S: "... several were taken in a garden in Virginia sucking Lilac blossoms on the 17 th of April."
XLII	SPHINX CONFIFERARUM Pine or Cypress Hawk-moth	<i>Lapara confiferarum</i> (J.E. Smith) Pine Sphinx	A: "... And is in Virginia." S: "... and is found in Virginia."

Table 1 (continued).

PLATE NO.	PUBLISHED NAMES	CURRENT NAMES	COMMENTS BY ABBOT (A) AND SMITH (S)
XLIV	SPHINX OCTOMACULATA Yellow-spotted Tyger Hawk-moth	<i>Ahypia octomacula</i> (F.) Eight-spotted Forester	A: "It is likewise in Virginia." S: "It is likewise found in Virginia."
L	PHALAEANA PROSERPINA Black Emperor Moth	<i>Hemileuca maia</i> (Drury) Buck Moth	A: "They are not near so frequent in Georgia as in Virginia." S: "They are much the most plentiful in the last mentioned country [Virginia]."
LIX	PHALAEANA NEUSTRIA Oak Lackey Moth	<i>Malacosoma dissitria</i> (Hübner) Forest Tent Caterpillar Moth	A: "This sort I have seen so plenty in Virginia as to strip the Oaks bare." S: "This kind is sometimes so plentiful in Virginia as to strip the oaks bare."
LX	PHALAEANA CASTRENSIS Plum Lackey Moth	<i>Malacosoma americanum</i> (F.) Eastern Tent Caterpillar	A: "...in Virginia I have seen a whole Apple Orchard stripped bare of the leaves." S: "...in Virginia a whole apple orchard is sometimes stripped of the leaves by it."
LXI	PHALAEANA REGIA Royal Persimmon Moth	<i>Citheronia regalis</i> (F.) Royal Walnut Moth	A: "This caterpillar in Virginia is called the Hickory horned Devil." S: "This caterpillar is called in Virginia the Hickory Horned Devil."
LXII	PHALAEANA VIRGO Large American Tiger Moth	<i>Grammia virgo</i> (L.) Virgin Tiger Moth	A: "In Virginia [caterpillar] spins up in April, Bred in May." S: "In Virginia it spins in April, and comes forth in May."
LXVII	PHALAEANA ACRIA Cream Ermine Moth	<i>Estigmene acrea</i> (Drury) Salt Marsh Moth	A: "It is also common in Virginia." S: "...is found in Virginia as well as Georgia."
LXX	PHALAEANA PUNCTATISSIMA Small Ermine Moth	<i>Hyphantria cinea</i> (Drury) Fall Webworm Moth	A: "Is also in Virginia." S: "This species is also a native of Virginia."
LXXI	PHALAEANA FURCULA Kitten Moth	<i>Furcula borealis</i> (Guérin-Méneville) White Furcula	A: "Is also in Virginia. But is very rare." S: "...is found also in Virginia, but it is a very rare species."
LXXII	PHALAEANA ANASTOMOSIS Mocoa Stone Moth	<i>Clostera inehsa</i> (Hübner) Angle-lined Prominent	A: "It is likewise in Virginia." S: "The moth is rare in its perfect state, though found in Virginia as well as in Georgia."
LXXIII	PHALAEANA CIPPUS Dogwood Snail-caterpillar Moth	<i>Euclea delphinii</i> (Boisduval) Spiny Oak-slug Moth	A: "Is not Common & is also in Virginia." S: "It is not common, though found in Virginia as well as Georgia."

Table 1 (continued).

PLATE NO.	PUBLISHED NAMES	CURRENT NAMES	COMMENTS BY ABBOT (A) AND SMITH (S)
LXXIV	PHALAEANA PITHECIUM Bat-caterpillar Moth	<i>Phobetrion pithectum</i> (J.E. Smith) Hag Moth	A: "Is also in Virginia, but is very Rare." S: "This species is found also in Virginia, but is very rare."
LXXIX	PHALAEANA LEUCOSTIGMA Pale Vapourer Moth	<i>Orgyia leucostigma</i> (J.E. Smith) White-marked Tussock Moth	A: "It is also in Virginia, but is not very Common." S: "This is also a Virginian insect, but is not very common."
LXXXVII	PHALAEANA AURORA Pink and Yellow Prominent Moth	<i>Hyparpax aurora</i> (J.E. Smith) Pink Prominent	A: "It is also in Virginia, but is far from being Common." S: "This kind is found also in Virginia, though far from common."
LXXXIX	PHALAEANA CONSORS Common American Yellow-underwing Moth (Fig. 2, back cover)	<i>Catocala consors</i> (J.E. Smith) The Consort	A: "This moth is frequent in the Oak Woods both here & in Virginia." S: "This is a common moth in the oak woods, both in Georgia and Virginia."
XC	PHALAEANA AMASIA Yellow-underwing Looper Moth	<i>Catocala similis</i> (W.H. Edwards) Similar Underwing	A: "It is also in Virginia." S: "...is a native of Virginia as well as of Georgia."
XCII	PHALAEANA HASTULIFERA American-alders Dagger Moth	<i>Acronicta hastulifera</i> (J.E. Smith) Frosted Dagger Moth	A: "It is also in Virginia but is not very Common." S: "It is also in Virginia, but not very common."
XCIV	PHALAEANA OBLINITA Smearer, or Cotton Moth	<i>Acronicta obliquata</i> (J.E. Smith) Smearer Dagger Moth	A: "It is also in Virginia." S: "...it is found in Virginia as well as Georgia."
XCV	PHALAEANA COMMELINAE Commelina, or Wild-comfrey Moth	<i>Spodoptera dolichos</i> (F.) Dolichos Armyworm Moth	A: "The moth is not very Common & is also in Virginia." S: "This moth, though found also in Virginia, is not very common."
C	PHALAEANA RHEXIAE Tobacco-bud-worm Moth	<i>Heliothis virescens</i> (F.) Tobacco Budworm Moth	A: "This worm is a Great Enemy to the Tobacco Planters in Virginia..." S: "...it is very pernicious in Virginia and other places..."
CI	PHALAEANA CLEMATARIA Great Hook-tip Looper Moth	<i>Eutrapela clemataria</i> (J.E. Smith) Curve-toothed Geometer	A: "Is also in Virginia." S: "...both in Georgia and Virginia."
CIII	PHALAEANA QUERNARIA American Oak Beauty	<i>Phaeoura quernaria</i> (J.E. Smith) Oak Beauty	A: "Is also in Virginia." S: "...both in Georgia and Virginia."
CIV	PHALAEANA CALYCANTHATA Brown and White-margined Moth	<i>Zale calycanthata</i> (J.E. Smith) Double-banded Zale	A: "It is not very Common but is most frequent in Virginia..." S: "This is not very common in Georgia, but more so in Virginia..."



Fig. 2. The Consort, *Catocala consors* (J. E. Smith), Plate 89 from *Insects of Georgia* by J. E. Smith & J. Abbot (1797).

described by Smith as new to science.

Abbot's records continue to provide valuable insight into the past faunas of Virginia and Georgia. If valid, his Virginia record of The Consort, *Catocala consors* (J. E. Smith) (Fig. 2, back cover), represents only the second report of this moth in the state (S. M. Roble, pers. comm.). Abbot remarked in his notes that this species is "frequent in the Oak Woods both here [Georgia] & in Virginia" (Table 1). Of course, it should be kept in mind that similar species were confused in Abbot's day and most remained unknown to science. This is also evident in Abbot's illustrations of the "Dingy Skipper Butterfly" and the "Brown Skipper Butterfly," both of which portray more than one species (Calhoun, 2006a) (Table 1). Abbot likely completed the drawings for *Insects of Georgia* between the years 1783 and 1792 (Calhoun, 2006a), at least eight years after leaving Virginia. Although Abbot's recollections were sometimes faulty (Calhoun, 2007a), the majority of his written and illustrated observations are accurate and historically relevant.

Abbot became dispirited by the political atmosphere in Virginia, the loss of many of his specimens, and the meager insect populations there. William Goodall, a cousin of Parke Goodall who had lived in Georgia, convinced Abbot to move to Georgia in early December 1775. It was there that Abbot expected a more favorable

situation in which to improve his collecting and painting. Drury actually hoped that Abbot would relocate to Suriname in South America, an exotic locality where numerous natural history specimens had been obtained by prior explorers (letter dated 28 November 1774, BMNH). For the next six decades Abbot continued to document the flora and fauna of Georgia, chiefly its birds and insects. Abbot's contributions will continue to be studied by a host of librarians, entomologists, ornithologists, botanists, historians, and art connoisseurs.

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